

## Joe, Survivor of the Alamo

A series of introductory essays inspired by the stories told at Brush Square Museums.

By Katie Bender

It is a hard truth that slavery is the institute our democracy, that holds freedoms so dear, is built on. This is particularly true on Mexico's northern frontier where settlers used freedom as their battle cry while actually fighting for the right to keep slaves. To write about slavery as an institute of the past is inaccurate and does not recognize the ways black and brown bodies continue to be disenfranchised in the United States. We live in the repercussions of slavery daily. Getting to know Joe, the sole male survivor of the battle of the Alamo, is a study in the contradictions of slavery and freedom on the frontier, that echoes through time and continues to shape policy today.



*William W. Brown.* From William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, an American Slave Written by Himself.* (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1848), frontis. Image courtesy of The University of Oklahoma Libraries, Western History Collections.

## BORN INTO SLAVERY

Most of what we know of Joe's life comes from a paper trail of being bought and sold. However his brother, William Wells Brown, escaped to Canada and became a famed author, abolitionist, and lecturer. His autobiography paints a clear picture of Joe's childhood and family life on Dr. Young's plantation. Most likely born in 1815 near Lexington, Kentucky, Joe's mother Elizabeth was mulatto, her father was Daniel Boone, and all six of her children had different fathers. Despite this outrageous lack of agency, Elizabeth was a devoted mother and an incredibly hard worker. In 1816, (1) Dr. Young moved his entire estate consisting of 40 slaves, a new wife, and child to Missouri where he founded the town of Marthasville. Joe grew up a field hand who spent

his days working alongside his family. In some respects he was lucky. The family lived under one roof, Saturdays were free, and Joe could spend his days hunting and fishing or hire himself out to make money for the family. William was able to get an education, and it's likely he passed some of that learning on to his brothers and sister. Still, Joe's life was not his own. Mr. Cook, the overseer, controlled every aspect of his time, and the possibility that the family could be sold off and separated loomed as a constant uncertainty. At the age of fifteen, William (whose father was Dr. Young's brother), was elevated to the role of house servant and moved into the big house. It was the first of a series of painful separations for the family. (2)

## **ST. LOUIS**

In 1826, an economic recession plagued Missouri. Dr. Young gave up on Marthasville and moved to St. Louis, an established river town with plenty of potential patients and a direct line to merchandise. St. Louis also offered Dr. Young the opportunity to rent his slaves out for cash. An enslaved person rented out was in even worse circumstances, as the renter had no long term investment in his or her well being. William told horrifying stories of the abuse he suffered in such circumstances. He also spent time working on a boat on the Mississippi, passing on stories of the slave markets in New Orleans and the potential for freedom just on the other side of the river. It was in St. Louis that William made up his mind to escape. Dr. Young's financial situation did not improve and in 1829 he sold Joe, his mother, his sister, and his brother Milford to Isaac Mansfield. (1) A reputable tinner, Mansfield had quickly established himself as a necessary part of the port town economy. Though the family was separated, William made a point of visiting Elizabeth and his siblings as often as possible. William was torn between a need to escape and a desire to keep the family together. Mansfield's business slowed and he began to talk of moving to northern Mexico to start over. The move would only be economically viable by selling off slaves, and talk of escape became urgent. In 1832, Elizabeth, Joe's younger sister was sold to a slave trader in Natchez. William vowed to escape with their mother with the hope of reuniting the family in the north as soon as possible. William and Elizabeth crossed the Mississippi into Illinois on a stolen boat. They traveled north for fourteen days but were stopped by bounty hunters and returned to St. Louis. Mansfield immediately booked passage to New Orleans for himself, Joe, Milford, and Joe's mother, to curtail any future plans of escape. (2)

## **MEXICO'S NORTHERN FRONTIER**

In 1821, Mexico gained its independence from Spain, and with it, a huge swath of land stretching as far south as Chiapas as far north and west as California. The business of how to unite and govern such a vast burgeoning democracy made for a volatile push-pull between a centralized government and state rights. The state of Coahuila y Texas on Mexico's northern frontier, had very little infrastructure, a stalwart but small population of Tejanos, and ongoing skirmishes with Native tribes, particularly the Comanche. In an effort to populate the region, Mexico began offering land grants to Empresarios to invite settlers in at a very attractive rate with an easy path to citizenship. Settlers from all over poured into Mexico, especially slave

owners looking to extend their potential for cotton and sugar production. Mexico's constitution forbid slavery but the governor of Coahuila made an exception for "property" brought into the state, knowing it would be an economic boon to the region.

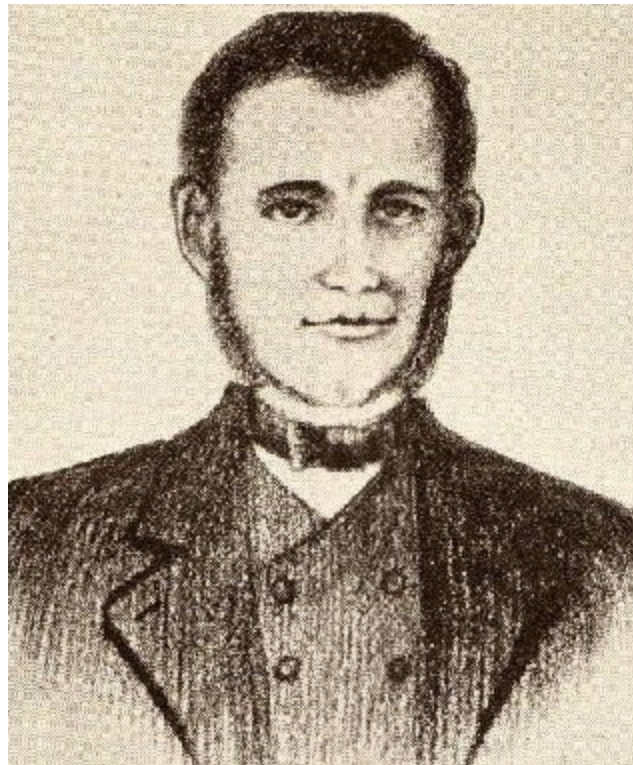


Map of the region of the first Mexican Empire, 1821. Digital Image. Wikipedia. 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican\\_Texas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_Texas)

The huge influx of settlers worried the federal government. In 1827, Manuel de Mier y Terán received a federal commission to travel through Coahuila and report back if there was a need to fortify points of entry into Mexico. He described the colonists as "more progressive and informed than the Mexican inhabitants" but also "more shrewd and unruly" "among these foreigners are fugitives from justice, honest laborers, vagabonds and criminals ...but honorable and dishonorable alike travel with their political constitution in their pockets, demanding the privileges, authority and officers which said constitution guarantees." (3) A battle between the federal government and local officials in Coahuila y Texas made for mercurial laws around slavery that most settlers simply ignored. On April 28th, 1832, the year Mansfield brought Joe and his family to Mexico, Article 36 stated that no slave could be held for longer than ten years and all colonists attempting to enter with slaves would be turned back at the port. Mansfield most likely learned of this new law in New Orleans and was able to circumvent the carefully monitored ports by entering Texas on land with a covered wagon. Did Joe and his family know of this law? Did they intuit from overheard conversation or Mansfield's secretive behavior the uncertain circumstances they were moving into? On September 15th, 1832, Mansfield formally certified that he had emigrated to the country of Mexico and agreed to comply with all provisions of the law. The family settled in Harrisburg, where they were welcomed by a small but close knit community. Given the rough circumstances, it is likely Joe, his family, and Mansfield lived together in a very basic shack and worked side by side to make the land habitable as quickly as

possible. (1) On June 15th, 1833, the Brazos and Colorado rivers overflowed causing an economic downturn in the region. In February of 1834, Mansfield sold Joe to sheriff John W. Moore with William Barret Travis serving as attorney. Joe, on hearing he'd been sold, attempted an escape but was recaptured and returned. Sheriff Moore claimed Mansfield owed him three hundred dollars to secure Joe's release. Mansfield sold Joe's brother Milford to recoup his losses and Joe was rented out to Travis. That August Mansfield died. Rather than emancipating the slaves, as was the law in Mexico at the time, creditors requested the slaves be used as value against Mansfield's debt. On December 22nd, 1834, Joe was put on the auction block in San Felipe and sold to John Cummings. On January 31st, 1835, Elizabeth and her children were sold. Two months later she sued for freedom for herself and her youngest children. Clearly she was aware of the laws in Mexico. No record exists of the outcome of her trial. Cummings then sold Joe to Travis and Joe's life was transformed once more. He would not see his mother or siblings again.

## TRAVIS



Sketch alleged to be of William B. Travis by Wylie Martin (1776-1842).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_B.\\_Travis#/media/File:William\\_B.\\_Travis\\_by\\_Wiley\\_Martin.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_B._Travis#/media/File:William_B._Travis_by_Wiley_Martin.JPG)  
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Like so many settlers before him, Travis came to Coahuila y Texas to make a new start. He left a pregnant wife, young son, and a trail of debt behind him in Alabama. In Anahuac, in 1831, Travis set up a successful law practice. He also wrote articles for the local paper, hosted parties, and bought and rented out slaves. An ambitious young man with his sights set on making a name for himself, Travis was known for his fancy attire, dancing, gambling, and socializing. He was passionate, energetic, and honest, but also loud and harsh. Joe was eloquent and carried himself with a dignity beyond his twenty years; he must have enhanced Travis' image. As his body servant, Joe went with him everywhere. Joe was responsible for his clothes, his carriage, his mule, and any other personal detail Travis needed. The two spent a great deal of time together, and by all accounts their relationship was amicable. Travis was outspoken about his desire for a new independent government in Texas. In 1834, he was appointed Secretary to San Felipe Ayuntamiento; his political career was on the rise. Travis' impulsive nature and willingness to escalate tensions was apparent when, in June of 1835, he received a letter from a colleague named DeWitt Clinton Harris. Harris had had an argument with a group of soldiers at the custom house in Anahuac. He was briefly arrested and a Texan shot. On hearing this news, Travis quickly called together a group of volunteers in Harrisburg, got ahold of a six-pound cannon, and led an improvised attack on the custom house. Captain Antonio Tenorio was surprised and did surrender, however, it was not at all clear that Travis' actions were considered reasonable given the circumstances. He wrote a letter shortly after begging forgiveness if anyone had mistaken his actions as unnecessarily rash. (4) The political winds were changing. Santa Anna raised taxes and began to confiscate weapons, and alarmed settlers became more willing to fight for autonomy. On December 20th, 1835, the Texan General Council "unanimously elected Travis as Lieutenant Colonel to command the newly created "Legion of the Cavalry." On December 25th, Travis was ordered to the frontier with all the volunteer troops he could gather. Joe would accompany him to the front.

## **THE BATTLE OF THE ALAMO**

Travis and Joe arrived in San Antonio de Béxar on February 5th, 1836 with the knowledge that Santa Anna was already heading north with a sizable army. (1) The mission Alamo, defended and lost by General Cos two months prior, and located geographically between the region's capital of Saltillo and the northern provinces, would certainly be Santa Anna's key to gaining control of the region. The Alamo mission was damaged from the previous battle and volunteer troops were scarce. Commander Colonel Neill had just received word that his family was sick and decided to leave. The post would be turned over to Travis. However, the volunteer soldiers didn't trust his leadership in battle and voted Bowie into the position. Travis and Bowie determined to share the position. Like all the other volunteers at the mission, Joe spent his time fortifying the walls and preparing for the upcoming siege, while also attending to Travis personal needs. On February 22nd, Travis hosted a ball in celebration of George Washington's birthday. Unbeknownst to the volunteers, Santa Anna's army was camped just eight miles away on the banks of the Medina River. Early the next morning, scouts returned with the news of Santa Anna's approaching army many days earlier than expected. San Fernando's church bells called all volunteers into the mission as Travis and Bowie wrote letters asking for help from Judge

Andrew Ponton in Gonzales and Colonel James Fannin in Goliad. Travis and Bowie's poor leadership was immediately apparent. While Travis responded to Santa Anna's red flag by raising a red flag of his own and firing a cannon shot, Bowie sent a volunteer out with a white flag to request parley. The response from Santa Anna was unconditional surrender. Travis then sent out his own request for parley and was quickly turned down. For the next thirteen days, the group of volunteers and non-combatants (women, children, and enslaved people) lived together in the mission with Santa Anna's army surrounding them on all sides. Throughout this time, Travis and Joe shared close quarters in an extreme situation. The bond they formed would influence the rest of Joe's life. On the morning of March 6th, 1836, Santa Anna attacked. Travis and Joe were awakened by shouts and each grabbed a gun and ran to the wall. With the other volunteers, Joe and Travis shot down on the advancing soldiers. Travis was shot, and as the army breached the wall, Joe took shelter in a nearby barracks. Through the crack in the door, he watched Travis die. Joe stayed hidden in the room for the duration of the battle. Finally someone called in "Are there any negroes here?" and Joe hesitantly came out. (1) Two Mexican soldiers tried to kill him, but officer Miguel Barragan stepped in and saved his life. Joe was tasked with identifying the bodies of Travis and Bowie, and then led to Santa Anna who questioned him about the state of the rebel army before he was dismissed.



*The Alamo*, 1849. Courtesy of The University of Texas Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

## **AFTERMATH & JOE TELLS HIS STORY**

Joe mistrusted Santa Anna, and whether he was to be executed like the other combatants who survived or pressed into indentured servitude was unclear. He was determined to leave San Antonio quickly. He heard that Susanna Dickinson, one of the survivors of the battle, was sent with escort to Gonzales to tell Houston of the battle. Joe slipped out of town and caught up with Susanna and her escort Ben on the road. Susanna welcomed Joe into their company and the three headed east together. (1) On March 12th, they arrived at the Kimble house. Susanna, who knew the family, knocked on the door while Joe and Ben preferred to stay outside hidden in the woods. The following morning they came upon three escorts from Houston's troops; together they ferried across the Guadalupe and finally arrived at camp where they were taken to Houston to tell the story of the battle. People gathered around Joe to hear the details of the battle.

William Fairfax Gray noted in his diary that Joe “related the affair with much modesty, apparent candor, and remarkably distinctly for one of his class”. (5) On hearing of the battle and that Santa Anna’s army was on the move, Houston had the entire town of Gonzales burned to the ground and everyone fled east. On March 20th, Joe returned to Washington-on-the-Brazos where he was treated as a war hero as the only male known to have survived the battle. It seems that Joe returned to Washington-on-the-Brazos to tell the news to Travis’ son Charles. Whatever his intentions, Joe was quickly taken back into the Travis estate by the executor, John Rice Jones. Despite Mexico’s laws, and his status as a war hero, Joe was promptly returned to slavery. On March 6th, 1837, exactly a year after the battle of the Alamo, Joe was taken to Jones’ newly purchased plantation on Bailey’s Prairie where he worked as a field hand with several other slaves and Mexican parolees.

### **A SECOND ESCAPE & A LONG JOURNEY EAST**

To commemorate the battle of San Jacinto, the well-to-do families of the Houston area planned a ball to celebrate Sam Houston. Jones and his wife Ruth had Joe and a Mexican parolee named Domingo dressed up and given horses to escort them to and from the party. At the party, Joe and Domingo quickly made their escape and their absence wasn’t noticed for many hours. They escaped on April 21st, 1837, and a month later Jones placed an ad in the local paper offering a reward if they were returned. Where Joe and Domingo spent the next six months is a mystery. However, on November 6th, Jones stopped paying for the advertisement and Joe’s name returned to the household ledger. Perhaps as a punishment, or to recoup his losses, or both, Joe was rented out to Elisha Maxey of Brazoria County for hard labor. In 1838, Joe made one final escape heading north and east. For forty days he travelled through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. He forded major rivers including the Mississippi, the Tombigbee, and the Alabama. He travelled mostly at night, avoiding bounty hunters, mistrustful citizens, and other slaves. (1) Somehow he escaped predators, and was able to forge enough food to stay alive. He made this unlikely and dangerous journey east to arrive on Nicholas Travis’ farm outside of Sparta, Alabama, to tell him the details of the death of his brother William Barrett Travis. Amazed by the story and the journey he’d made to tell it, Nicholas bought Joe into the family, where he remained for at least the next fifteen years.



Image from *Joe, The Slave who Became An Alamo Legend*. Pg 237. Map by Carol Zuber-Mallison

There are few clues regarding Joe's life after arriving on the Travis farm in Alabama. Sometime between 1839 and 1854 Nicholas Travis paid six hundred and fifty dollars to the William Travis estate, most likely to purchase Joe. (6) In 1850 Elizabeth Travis gave birth to a son she named Joseph Mark Travis, and Joe was asked to change his name. Ben was the name of his oldest brother, who had died when they were children, and it seems Joe took the name for the rest of his life, accounting for some confusion about his whereabouts in later years. The 1840 census notes one male enslaved person of twenty five years, the age Joe would have been at the time, at the Cato house. It is possible Joe spent time living with Charles and Isabella at their grandparents home in Monroe, Alabama. Joe outlived Nicholas Travis and in his later years returned to Texas, perhaps with either Charles or Isabella, who both moved to Texas as adults. In 1877 an editor of the *Statesmen* in Austin wrote "There are several old soldiers of the Texas Revolution in Austin and in adjacent towns and counties...Two years ago the old colored body servant of Gen. Travis was in this city and his home was not far away." (7) Susanna Dickinson, in an interview with the *San Antonio Express* in 1878 refers to Joe by his new name-Ben, the two must have been in contact and, as Susanna didn't read, must have met up in person sometime in the 1870's. Finally, an article written in the *Montgomery Advertiser* in 1905 claims that William Travis' youngest brother James returned to the Alamo with "Old Ben" who was then a freedman. (8) Ben did outlive the Travis family, and I'd like to think he found freedom in his old age, but like so much history of enslaved people in Texas we will never know the full story. Joe's life bears witness to the unshaking need of Anglo settlers to use black bodies as property. Time and time again Joe should have been recognized, emancipated and like the other heroes given reparation for his struggle. He was not. The incredible journey he made east to Alabama is a testament to the unshakeable duty he felt to the Travis family, regardless of his own circumstances.



1. *Joe; The Slave Who Became An Alamo Legend*. Ron J. Jackson, Jr. and Lee Spencer White. University of Oklahoma Press. 2015 pg 20, 33, 37, 41,42,45, 50, 52, 55, 95, 96, 98,197, 203

2. *From Fugitive Slave to Freeman; The Autobiographies of William Wells Brown*. William Wells Brown. Boston. Published in the Anti-Slavery Office, No.25 Cornhill. 1847. Ch. 4, 5, and 6.

3. Mexico Minister of Relations Manuel Gómez Pedraza to General Manuel de Mier y Terán, September 12th, 1827, transcripts from the *Archivo de Guerra Y Marina, Operaciones Militares, Fraccion 1*, Austin Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

4. William Barret Travis letter to Henry Smith, July 6, 1835 in John Henry Borwn, *Life and Times of Henry Smith*, 60-61.

5. *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray, from Virginia to Texas, 1835-1837*. Copyright 1997 William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies. Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

6. Orphan Court Orders, Book I (1833-1854), Court Clerk's Office, Monroe County, Alabama.

7. *Statesman* (Austin, Texas), April 7, 1877

8. *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 4th, 1905